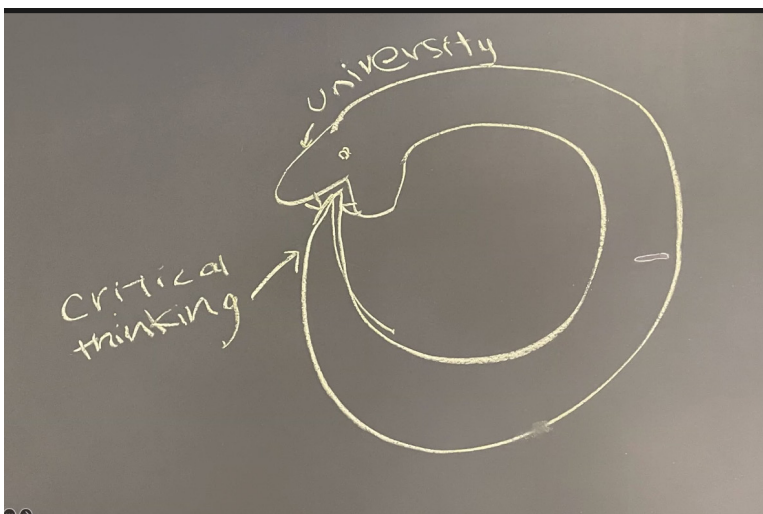


Is theory the lens we use to see the world around us? On the afternoon of September 25, I attended "Theory Acts," an online architectural theory symposium. It was hosted by Irene Cheng (Chair of the Graduate Architecture program) and James Graham (Assistant Professor) and co-presented by Creative Citizens in Action (CCA@CCA). The symposium attempted to broach the shifting focus of architectural theory over time. Which urgent questions should the discipline seek to answer? Furthermore, what is the role of architectural theory in practice? Additionally, how have politics sculpted the way we think about architectural history? In order to explore these concepts further, three guest speakers from across the academic sphere were invited to share their unique approaches to these questions: Ana Maria León from the Harvard GSD, Jay Cephias from the Princeton School of Architecture, and Aaron Cayer from Cal Poly Pomona.

Anna Maria León's approach is focused on theory as a tool of healing. She began her talk by quoting bell hooks, who wrote: "I came to theory because I was hurting." For León, theory is a way of understanding the brutal pain and suffering in the world, an attempt to comprehend and empathize with the world around and within us. More specifically, it is a way of understanding how settler-colonialism, neoliberalism, and capitalism have affected our lands, materials, labor, and knowledge, and in turn, how this has affected our collective capacity to heal societal division.

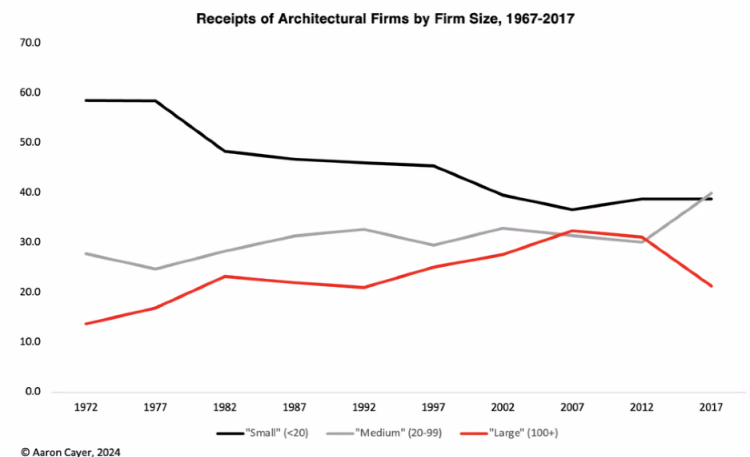


Screenshot of drawing by Ana Maria León

As part of León's work in theory, she guides her students in creating quick sketches and diagrams. These drawings are incredibly helpful in encouraging less outspoken students to share their ideas nonverbally. Using this format, students can communicate complex concepts in an accessible and oftentimes collaborative way. The drawing of the snake eating its own tail is one that León specifically brought to our attention. I interpret it as calling out the hypocrisy of Ivy League universities who claim to use critical and revolutionary thinking as a core principle, yet simultaneously press charges against student protesters and invest in morally dubious military defense firms.

Similarly to León, Jay Cephias views theory as a tool of repair. He claimed that theory needs to be active rather than passive. For him, writing and speaking theory is an action with inherent power. When considering an action with power, Cephias reminds us that it is critically important to consider social and political dynamics and imbalances. Throughout architectural history, the work of certain people has been legitimized over others, while much of the contributions of those belonging to colonized and marginalized groups has been appropriated or overlooked. The legacies of the dispossessed have been swept under the rug. Cephias asks us to challenge the foundations of the field, as the role of the theorist is to question the foundations of historiography. To illustrate this point, Cephias mentioned the work of Black architects who were enslaved in the United States, a topic I am eager to learn more about.

Cephias repeatedly emphasized that theory should be a personal self reflection, not just an external consideration. The "aesthetic regime" of architectural history and theory has created a problem: there is too much emotional distance between the self and the subject. It is impossible to eliminate



Screenshot of graph by Aaron Cayer

human subjectivity in architectural theory; in fact, it weakens the field when historians, theorists, and architects in practice delude themselves into believing that they can think truly objectively. Rather, Cephas suggests a more personal approach—where the self is considered as a function of history just as much as the subject. This approach resonates deeply with me, as I believe that it is impossible to achieve true objectivity; striving for this illusion can make us lose our unique personhood.

The final speaker, Aaron Cayer, mostly spoke of theory as practice. He began by quoting Fred Hampton who proclaimed: “Theory with no practice ain’t shit.” Cayer’s speech was refreshing as he criticized large commercial architectural offices for their hypocritical ideology, which he referred to as “mega firms.” Within the last five decades, massive firms with 100+ employees have been on the rise, boxing out the smaller design teams. Oftentimes, the actions of these mega firms directly contradict their own words. There may be lofty ambitions for an architecture beyond capitalism, and yet these firms still operate safely within neoliberal ideals and hold up imperial power structures.

Cayer asked the question: Is decolonization a metaphor or a practice? He uses the idea of a “move to innocence” to demonstrate the cognitive dissonance at play in architectural practice. This is a rationalization technique used by settlers to justify their innocence in occupying Indigenous lands. Ever since Cayer brought up this idea, I have been thinking of it. Whether we are talking about American colonization, the urban renewal of the 1950s, contemporary gentrification and settler movements, or the brutal assault on Palestinians via bombing and entrapping border walls, architecture has often played a key role in justifying horrific acts in the name of a so-called “greater good.”

In architectural competitions, jury prizes are often awarded based on aesthetics with little to no thought towards material and labor conditions. Theory is considered “optional,” rather than foundational. However, these speakers would all agree that theory is always being practiced, even when we are not directly aware of it. If we are not critically self reflective, we will unconsciously uphold the underlying power structures which shape our world. Theory is the lens we use to see the world around us, and when engaged with properly, it can become a praxis for healing and repair.

Dawn Lorence (MARCH 2026) is a biomaterial researcher and an aspiring architect hoping to utilize adaptive reuse in design.

